

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a dark green color, framing the central text.

Footsteps

Harlan Ellison

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For her, darkness never fell in the City of Light. For her, nighttime was the time of life, the time filled with moments of light brighter than all the cheap neon sullyng the Champs-Élysées.

Nor had night ever fallen in London; nor in Bucharest; nor in Stockholm; nor in any of the fifteen cities she had visited on this holiday. This gourmet tour of the capitals of Europe.

But night had come frequently in Los Angeles.

Precipitating flight, necessitating caution, producing pain and hunger, terrible hunger that could not be assuaged, pain that could not be driven from her body. Los Angeles had become dangerous. Too dangerous for one of the children of the night.

But Los Angeles was behind her, and all the headlines about the INSANE SLAUGHTER, about the RIPPER, about the TERRIBLE DEATHS. All that was behind her... and so were London, Bucharest, Stockholm, and a dozen other feeding grounds. Fifteen wonderful banquet halls.

Now she was in Paris for the first time, and night was coming with all its light and all its promise.

In the Hotel des Saints Peres she bathed at great length, taking the time she always took before she went out to dine, before she went out to find passion.

She had been startled to find the hotels in France did not provide washcloths. At first she had thought the chambermaid had forgotten to leave one, but when she called down to the reception desk, the girl who answered the phone could not understand what she was asking for. The receptionist's English was not good; and French was almost incomprehensible to Claire. Claire spoke Los Angeles very well: which was of no use in Paris. It was fortunate language was no barrier for Claire when she was ordering a meal. No problem at all.

They made querulous sounds at one another for ten minutes till the receptionist *finally* understood she was asking for a washcloth.

"Ah! *Oui, mademoiselle*," the receptionist said, "*le gant de toilette*!"

Instantly, Claire knew she had hit it. "Yes, that's right... *oui... gant*, uh... *gant* whatever you said... *oui... a washcloth...*"

And after *another* ten minutes she understood that the French thought the cloth with which one washed one's body was too personal to leave in a hotel room, that the French carried their own *gants de toilette* when they traveled.

She was amazed. And somehow mildly pleased. It bespoke a foreign way of life that promised new tastes, new thrills, possibly new highs of love. What she thought of as transports of ecstasy. In the night. In the bright light of darkness.

She lingered a long time in the bath, using the shower head on a flexible metal cord to wash her long blonde hair. The extremely hot bath water around her lower body, between her thighs, the cascade of hot water pouring down over her, eased the tension of the plane trip from Zurich, washed away the first signs of jet-lag that had been creeping up on her since London. She lay back in the tub and let the water flow over her. Rebirth. Rejuvenation.

And she was ferociously hungry.

But Paris was world-renowned for its cuisine.

She sat at a table outside Les Deux Magots, the café on the Boulevard St.Germain where Boris Vian and Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir had sat in the Forties and Fifties, thinking their thoughts and sometimes writing their words of existential loneliness. They sat there drinking their *partis*, their Pernod, and they were filled with a sense of the oneness of humanity with the universe. Claire sat and thought of her impending oneness with selected parts of humanity... And the universe was of no concern to her. For the children of the night, loneliness was born in the flesh. It lay at the core of the bones, it swam in the blood. For her, the idea of existential solitude was not an abstract theory; it was her way of life. From the first moment of awareness.

She had dressed for effect. Tonight the blue sky silk, slit high in the front. She sat at the edge of the crowd, facing the sidewalk, her legs crossed high, a simple glass of Perrier *avec citron* before her. She had not ordered *pate* or *terrines*: never taint the palate before indulging in a gourmet repast. She had avoided snacking all day, keeping herself on the trembling edge of hunger.

And the moveable feast walked past.

He was in his early forties, stuffy-looking, holding himself erect like Marshal Foch in the guidebook history of France she had bought. This man wore a sincere gray suit, double-breasted, pompously cut to obscure the fact that the quality was not that good.

The man—whom Claire now thought of as Marshal Foch—walked past, caught a flicker of nylon as she crossed her legs for his benefit, glanced sidewise and met the stare of her green eyes, and bumped into an old woman with a string bag filled with greens and bread. They did a little dance trying to avoid each other, and the old woman elbowed him aside roughly, muttering an obscenity under her breath.

Claire laughed brightly, warmly, disarmingly.

Marshal Foch looked embarrassed.

"Old women have very sharp elbows," she said to him. "They stay at home with pumice stone and sharpen them every day." He stared at her, and the expression that passed over his face assured her she had him hooked.

"Do you speak English?"

He took a long moment to shift linguistic gears and took a step closer. He nodded. "Yes, I do." His voice was deep, but measured: the voice of a man who watched the sidewalk as he walked, watched to make certain he did not filthy his shoes with dog droppings.

"I'm sorry I don't speak French," she said, drawing a deep breath so the blue sky silk parted slightly at her bosom. Making certain he didn't miss it, she let a pale, slim hand drift to her breasts as if in apology. He followed the movement with his narrowed eyes. Hooked, oh yes, hooked.

"You are American?"

"Yes. From Los Angeles. You've been there?"

"Yes, oh of course. I have been in America many times. My business."

"What is your business?"

Now he stood before her table, his briefcase hanging from his left hand, his chest pulled up to conceal the soft opulence gravity and age had brought to his stomach.

"I could sit down perhaps?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Certainly. How rude of me. Do sit down."

He pulled out the metal chair beside her, pushed the briefcase under, and sat down. He crossed his legs very carefully, like Marshal Foch, making certain the creases were sharp and straight. He sucked in his stomach and said, "I am dealing in artists' prints. Very fine work of new painters, graphic artists, airbrush persons. I travel very much in the world."

Not by foot, Claire thought. By 747, by Trans Europ Express, by chic tramp steamers carrying only a dozen curried passengers as supercargo. Not by foot. You haven't a stringy inch on your succulent body, Marshal Foch.

"I think that sounds wonderful," Claire said. Enthusiasm. Heady wine. Doors standing open. Invitations on stiff cockleshell vellum, embossed with elegant script. And, as always, since the morning of the world—spiders and flies.

"Oh, yes, I think so," he said, chuckling with pride. He did not say *think*; he pronounced it *sink*.

Sink. Down and down into the green water of her fine cool eyes.

He offered her a drink, she said she had a drink, he offered her *another* drink, some other kind of drink, some *stronger* drink. But she said no, she had a drink, thank you. Thus did she let him know she

was not a prostitute. It was always the same, in any great city. Strong drink.

She hoped he could not hear her stomach growling.

"Have you had dinner?" she asked.

He did not answer immediately. *Ah, you have a wife and children waiting for you, waiting to start dinner, perhaps in Neuilly*, she thought. *Why, you dirty middle-aged man.*

Then he said, "Ah, *non*. But I must make the phone call to break engagement of a business nature. You would care to have dinner with me, perhaps?"

"I think that would be lovely," she said, showing him, by a turn of her head, the precise angle that highlighted her excellent cheekbones. Before she had finished the sentence he was out of the chair and heading for the *cabines téléphoniques*.

She sat and sipped her Perrier, waiting for dinner to return.

That was quick, she thought, as he hustled back to her. *Let me guess what you said, darling: something important has come up... a buyer from Doubleday shops in America... he is interested in the Kawalerowicz and the Meynard prints... you know I hate staying in the city so late... but I must... ah, non, Françoise, don't be like zat... tell the children I bring them a tarte... stop! stop! I must stay longer... I will come as soon as I can... eat without me... I will not argue with you... goodbye ... au revoir... salut... à bientôt... gimme a break, will you, I want to get laid... I can hear you saying it now, my dear Marshal Foch.*

And she thought one thing more: *I hope they don't try to keep your dinner hot for you.*

He smiled at her but there was strain in his face. It wasn't all that good a face to contain strain. But he tried valiantly not to show the effect of the phone call. "Now we go, yes?"

She stood up slowly, letting the parts assemble in the most esthetic manner, and the smile on his face grew more placid. Oh yes: hooked.

They began walking. She had already done some walking in the area. Be prepared, that's the Girl Scouts' marching song.

She steered him into the Rue St. Benoît, thinking she could have dinner there without attracting a crowd. But it was still too early in the evening. The night life of Paris flows through the streets till well after two a.m. and dining *alfresco* is next to impossible. Claire never liked to hurry through a meal.

There were two restaurants at the end of Rue St. Benoît, and he suggested both of them. She made a charming move and said, "Why don't we walk a little farther. I want someplace more... romantic." He did not argue. Down Rue St. Benoît.

Left into Rue Jacob. Too busy.

Right onto Rue des Saints Peres. Still too busy. But up ahead... the river. The dark Seine, in the evening.

"Can we walk down to the river?"

He looked confused. "You want dinner, yes?"

"Oh, sure. Of course. But first let's walk down to the river. It's so beautiful, so lovely at night; this is my first time in Paris; it's so *romantic*." He did not argue.

On their right the bulk of a large building lay in darkness. She looked up at it, and past it, to the sky, in which the full moon shone like a waiting message.

Dining under the full moon was always nice.

He said, "This building is l'École des Beaux-Arts. Very famous." He pronounced it *fay-moose*. She laughed.

Dark. Always light. Sweet full moon riding through the heavens. Dinner warm and waiting. And then there was a bridge sweeping across the dark river. And steps leading down to the bank. Ah.

"Le Pont Royal," Marshal Foch said, indicating the bridge. "*Very fay-moose*." They walked across the quay and she led him down the steps. On the bank, two meters above the languid Seine, she turned and looked to left and right. Now she leaned against him and stood on her toes and kissed him. He sucked in his stomach, but it was not to hide the rotundity. She took him by the hand and led him toward the Pont Royal.

"Under the bridge," she said.

The sound of his breathing.

The sound of her high heels on the ancient stones.

The sound of the city above them.

The sound of the full moon glowing golden and getting larger in the sky.

And there, under the bridge, swathed in darkness, she leaned against him again and took his thick head between her slim, pale hands and put her mouth against his and let the sweet smell of her wash over him. She kissed him for a long moment, nipping at his lips with her teeth, and he made a small sound, like a tiny animal being stroked. But she was ahead of him. Her passion was already aroused.

And now Claire went away, to be replaced by something else.

A child of the night.

Child of loneliness.

With the last flickering awareness of her departing humanity she perceived the instant he knew he was in the love embrace of something else, the child of the night.

It was the instant she changed.

But that instant was too short for him to free himself. Now her spine had curved, and now her mouth had filled with fangs, and now

the claws had grown, and now the body beneath the blue sky silk was matted with fur, and now she was dragging him down, and now she was on top of him, and now the claws were ripping the sincere gray suit from his flesh, and now one blackened claw sliced a line through his throat so he could not scream; and now it was dinnertime.

It had to be done carefully and quickly.

He was erect, his penis swollen with arrested lust. Now she had him naked and on his back, and she was on him, and settling down over him; and he entered her, even as he gurgled his life away. She rode him, bucking and sweating, while his mouth worked futilely and his eyes grew large and surrounded by white.

Her orgasm was accompanied by a howl that rose up over the Seine and was lost in the night sky above Paris where the golden sovereign of the full moon swallowed it, glowing just a bit brighter with passion.

And down in the dark, surfeited with passion, she dined elegantly.

The food in Berlin had been too starchy; in Bucharest the blood had run too thin and the taste had not risen; in Stockholm the dining was too bland; in London too stringy; in Zurich too rich, she had been ill. Nothing to compare with the hearty fare in Los Angeles.

Nothing to compare with home cooking... until Paris.

The French were justly famous for their cuisine.

And she ate out every night.

It was a very good week, her first week in Paris. An elegant older man with bristling white moustaches who spoke of the military, right up to the end. A shampoo girl from a chic shop, who wore a kind of fluorescent purple jumpsuit and red candy-apple cowboy boots. An American student from Westfield, New York, studying at the Sorbonne, who told her he was in love with her, until the end when he said nothing. And others. Quite a few others. She was afraid her figure was going to hell.

And now it was Saturday again. *Samedi*.

She had felt like dancing. She was a good dancer. All the right rhythms at just the right times. One of her meals had said the most interesting *boîte*, at the moment, was a bar and restaurant combined with a *discotheque* called Les Bains-Douches, which translated as "the bath and shower" because it had formerly been a bath and shower house since the nineteenth century.

She had come to the Rue du Bourg l'Abbé and had stood before the large glass in the heavy door. A man and a woman were behind the glass, selecting who could come in and who could not. In Paris, the more one is kept out of the club, the more one wishes to enter.

The man and the woman looked at her. Both reached to unlock the door. Claire knew what she looked like; the appeal was evident to

male and female alike. She had never worried for a moment about gaining access. Inside.

And now, all around her, the excitement and the color and the firm strong young flesh of Paris moved in stately passion like underwater plants.

She danced a little, she drank a little, she waited.

But not for long.

He wore a very tight T-shirt with the words 1977 NCAA Soccer Champions on it. But he was not an American, nor an Englishman. He was French and his jeans, like his shirt, were very tight. He wore motorcycle boots with little chains banding the toe. His hair was long and waved back carelessly, but he did not have the sloe eyes of a punk. The eyes were sharp and blue and too intelligent for the face in which they rested. He stared down at her.

For a few moments she was unaware of him standing there, even though he was directly in front of her table. She was watching a particularly elegant couple performing lifts at the far right side of the dance floor; and he stood there, watching her without interference.

But when she looked up and he did not turn away, when his eyes did not narrow and he did not grow nervous as she turned the full power of her personality on him, she knew tonight would very likely be the best gourmet dining she had ever had.

His name was Patrick. He was a good dancer; they danced well together; and he held her tighter than a stranger had any right to hold her. She smiled at the thought because they would not be strangers for long; soon, if the night filled with light, they would be very intimate. Eternally intimate.

And when they left he suggested his apartment in Le Marais.

They went over the river to the old section, now quite fashionable. He lived on the top floor, but he was not wealthy. He told her that. She found him quite charming.

Inside, he turned on a soft blue light and another that was recessed in the wall behind a long chrome planter box filled with fat, healthy plants.

He turned to her and she reached out to take his head between her hands. He reached up and stopped her hands, and he smiled and said, in French she could understand, "You would eat some food?" She smiled. Yes, she *was* hungry.

He went into the kitchen and came back with a tray of carrots and asparagus and shredded beets and radishes.

They sat and talked. He talked, for the most part. In a French manner that posed no problems for her. She couldn't understand that. He spoke as fast and with as much complexity as all other Frenchmen, but when others spoke to her, in the hotel, in the street, in the disco, it

was gibberish; when he spoke, she understood perfectly. She thought he might have learned English somewhere and was speaking partially in her native tongue. But when her mind tried to halt one of the words she thought might be in English, it was gone too fast. But after a while she stopped worrying about it and just let him talk.

And when she leaned toward him, finally, to kiss him on the mouth, he reached across and put his hand up under her long blonde hair, up to the nape of the neck, and brought her face close.

Through the window she could see the waning moon. She smiled faintly within the kiss: it was not necessary to have a full moon. It never had been. That was where the legends were wrong. But the legend was correct about silver bullets. Silver of any kind. And therein lay the reason a vampire cast no reflection. (Except that was merely *another* legend. There were no vampires. Only children of the night who had been badly observed.) Because Jesus had been betrayed by Judas for thirty pieces of silver, the metal had been put to an evil purpose and was therefore, thereafter, invested with the power to turn away evil. So it was not the *mirror* that cast no reflection of the children of the night, it was the silver backing. Claire could be seen in a mirror of polished steel or aluminum. She could bathe in the river and see her reflection.

But never in a silver-backed mirror.

Such as the one over the fireplace just across from where she sat on the sofa with Patrick.

A *frisson* of warning went through her.

She opened her eyes. He was looking past her.

Into the mirror.

Where he sat alone, embracing nothing.

And Claire began to leave, to be replaced by the child of the night.

Fast. She moved very fast.

Spine curves, fur mats, teeth lengthen, teeth sharpen, claws grow. And her hand that was no longer a hand came up as she shoved him away from her, raking the razoring claws across his throat.

The throat opened wide.

And the green sap flowed out. For a moment. And then the wound magically puckered, drew together, formed a white line of scar, and then vanished altogether.

He watched her as she watched him heal.

For the first time in her life she was frightened.

"Would you like me to put on some music?" he asked. But he did not speak. His mouth did not move.

And she understood why his French had not been incomprehensible to her. He was speaking inside her head, without sound.

She could not answer.

"If not music, then perhaps you'd like something to eat," he said. And he smiled.

Her hands moved in vagrant ways, without purpose. Fear and total confusion commanded her. He seemed to understand. "It's a very large world," he said. "The spirit moves in many ways, in many forms. You think you're alone, and you are. There are many of us, one of each, last of our kind, perhaps, and each of us is alone. The mists part and the children emerge, and after a while the old ones die, leaving the last of the children motherless and fatherless."

She had no idea what he was saying. She had always known she was alone. That was simply the way it was. Not the foolish concept of loneliness of Sartre or Camus, but *alone*, all alone in a universe that would kill her if it knew she existed.

"Yes," he said, "and that's why I have to do something about you. If you are the last of your kind, then this life of chances, just to satisfy your needs, must end."

"You're going to kill me. Then do it quickly. I always knew that would happen. Just do it fast, you weird son of a bitch."

He had read her thoughts.

"Don't be a fool. I know it's hard not to be paranoid; what you've been all your life programs that into you. But don't be a fool if you can stop. There's nothing of survival in stupidity. That's why so many of the last of their kind are gone."

"What the hell *are* you?!?" she demanded to know.

He smiled and offered her the tray of vegetables.

"You're a carrot, a goddam carrot!" she yelled.

"Not quite," said the voice in her head. "But from a different mother and father than you; from a different mother and father than everyone else out on the streets of Paris tonight. And neither of us will die."

"Why do you want to protect *me*?"

"The last save the last. It's simple."

"For what? For what will you protect me?"

"For yourself... for me."

He began to remove his clothes. Now, in the blue light, she could see that he was very pale, not quite the shade that facial makeup had lent him; not quite white. Perhaps the faintest green tinge surging along under the firm, hard skin.

In all other respects, and superbly constructed, he was human; and tumescently male. She felt herself responding to his nakedness.

He came to her and carefully, slowly—because she did not resist—he removed her clothes; and she realized that she was Claire again, not the matted-fur child of the night. When had she changed back?

It was all happening without her control.

Since the time a very *long* time ago when she had gone on her own, she had controlled. Her life, the lives of those she met, her destiny. But now she was helpless, and she didn't mind giving over control to him. Fear had drained out of her, and something quicker had replaced it.

When they were both naked, he drew her down onto the carpet and began to make slow, careful love to her. In the planter box above them she thought she could detect the movement of the hearty green things trembling slightly, aching toward them and the power they released as they spasmed together in a ritual at once utterly new because theirs was the meeting of the unfamiliar, yet ancient as the moon.

And as the shadow of passion closed around her she heard him whisper, "There are many things to eat."

For the first time in her life, she could not hear the sound of footsteps following her.